

ELECTRONICS AND SYMPHONY: UNUSUAL SYZYGY

Campion's Premiere Work Inspired by Gasoline Engines

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ROHNERT PARK, CA—What a great musical surprise for the North Bay and the wine country!

On this college campus an hour's drive north of San Francisco, the new Weill Hall is dazzling, one of the very finest acoustic environments I have ever encountered in 50-plus years of attending symphonic music on both coasts (and in several cities in between).

The much-delayed hall, countless years in the planning process, finally opened this month, with the lucky ones—the Santa Rosa Symphony—moving several miles south to become the resident orchestra. An enviable designation, indeed.

TIP FOR THE SYMPHONY LOVER: After just one hearing, with Mahler's grand Symphony No. 1, I would gladly sacrifice the crown jewels in order to nail down lifetime tickets in the central balcony, a nonpareil vantage point to get the best aural massage that these ears ever hoped for, with every rich overtone present and accounted for. Oddly enough, these are far from the most expensive seats in Weill. Credit acoustician Lawrence Kirkegaard for arguably the finest achievement of his long symphony-design career around the USA.

Weill's orchestra seats, located two stories lower, allow both convenience and pleasant listening environment. But not really competition!

The 1,400-seat hall has a tall shoe-box design, much like Seiji Ozawa Hall (or the larger Boston Symphony Hall) in Massachusetts. It can also open up to a huge lawn-concourse for summer pops concerts and the like, with room for another 5,000 or so. And the stone (exterior) architecture is simple and tasteful, stylistically a bit like Nebuchadnezzar's ancient palace.

The opening SRS subscription program offered the latest of a growing trend of electronic sound blended with a live orchestra. This was the world premiere, *The Last Internal Combustion Engine*, a programmatic concerto grosso for full orchestra, string quartet and electronics. Composer Edmund Campion strove to blend these contrasting media together. These occur repeatedly in a pitter-pat pulse, where you never know if it's the percussionists, or the electronic circuitry sounding out through a specially built speaker from laboratories at Berkeley.

Campion fashioned a rhythm-based piece, with a chugga-chugga relentless forward pace, favoring minimalism over lyricism, closer to John Adams than to Philip Glass. There are amassed sound bundles overriding each other, like a jalopy riding down the road a mite erratically.

The soloists of the Kronos Quartet added sharp metallic staccato flashes on their strings, while the percussion and brass chimed in emphatically.

The 20-minute piece was clearly meant to be more eventful than beautiful. Toward the end, *The*

Last Internal Combustion Engine runs out of power. The whole piece winds down, with all the orchestra's players shaking small rattles, as if marking the death rattle of the contraption. Campion did achieve some fusion between electronics and live orchestra, though his opus offered more blocks of sectional sound and sonic overload than of themes or memorable harmonies. The three-movement programmatic work bore titles "Like Ice, Cold and Forbidden," "Suddenly Dark and Brooding" and "Suddenly Dawn."

The entire exercise had grown out of Campion's boyhood fascination with engines that you could dissect and reassemble. If it raised any people to a level of ecstasy, that would surely have been the mechanical engineers in the crowded hall. Campion, 55, took bows on stage with Conductor Bruno Ferrandis.

The piece de resistance of the concert in retrospect was Mahler's Symphony No. 1, a 54-minute purview of romanticism from many perspectives—a village dance for country bumpkins, a lung-bursting funeral march of searing tragedy, various quotations of Mahler lieder, and an exuberant, triumphal finale, with instruments' bells raised in full fire. Apart from some errant woodwinds that appeared to be a work in progress, the orchestra sounded excellent. The vivid, mobile Ferrandis with his epee-like flashes of baton was on top of the music, though rarely given to soft touches for the leisurely loving themes.

MUSIC NOTES—An added fillip for the balcony patrons is the grand view of the rolling hills, golden meadows and live oaks characteristic of the region seen through the windows.